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Mandy Migura

Recovery Planning Process for Cook Inlet Beluga Whales

National Recovery Program Review Meeting

April 19, 2016

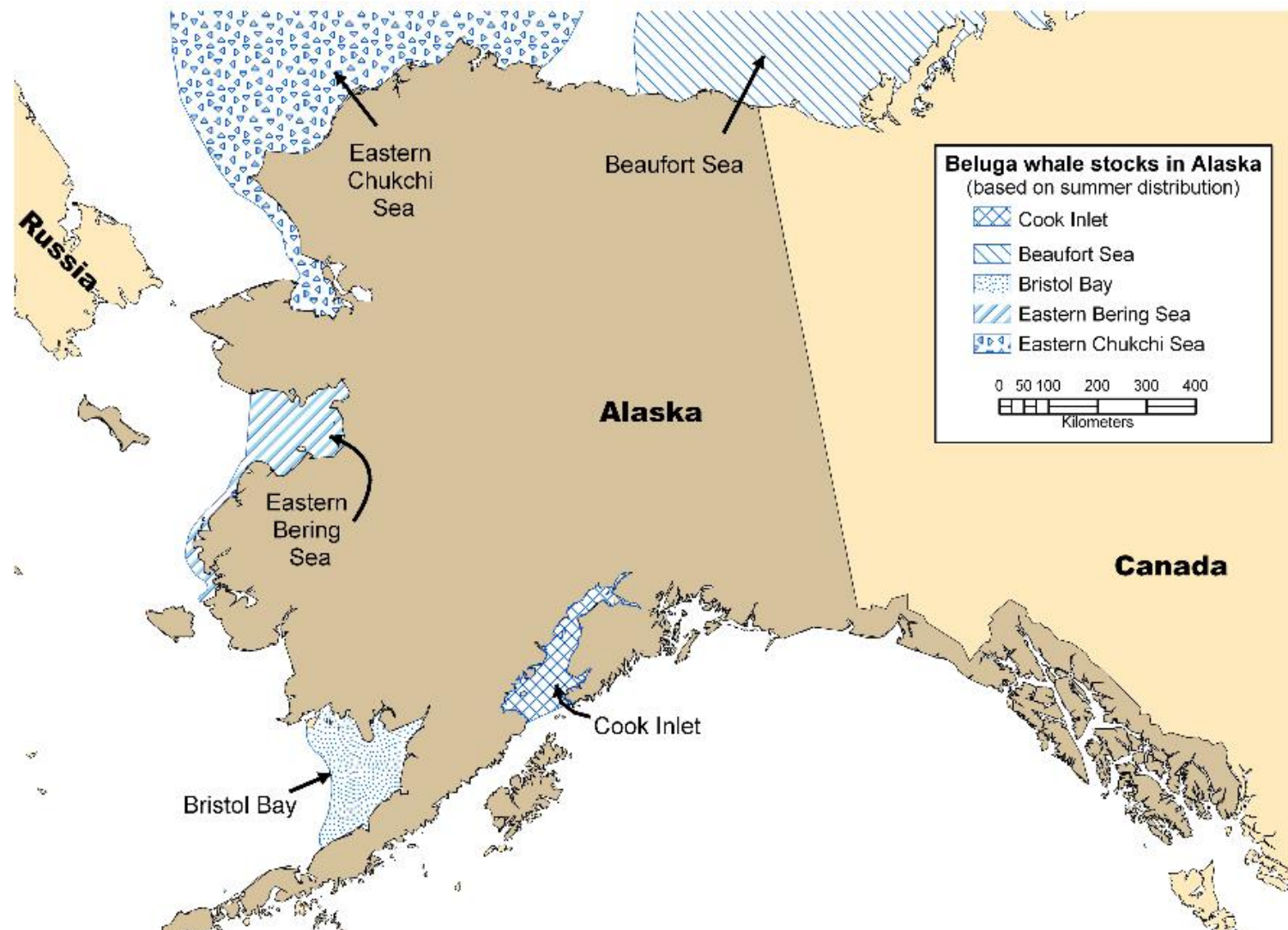


Photo credit: Chris Garner, DOD

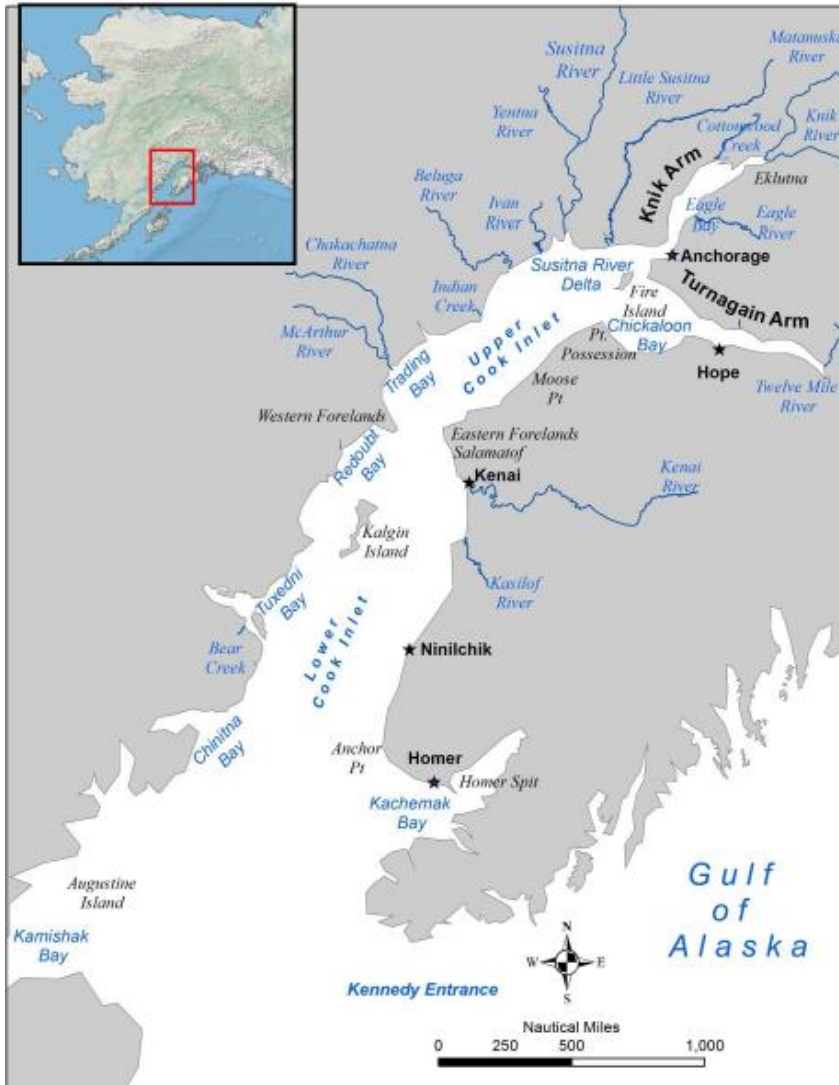
Case Study: Cook Inlet Beluga Whale DPS

- Recovery Plan Status:
 - draft recovery plan published;
 - comment period closed;
 - reviewing public and peer reviewer comments and making appropriate revisions
 - final plan anticipated later this year
- Plan Developed By:
 - A recovery team developed an initial working draft
 - NMFS staff completed draft & working to finalize plan

Alaska Beluga Stocks – Summer Distribution



Cook Inlet – Home to Cook Inlet Belugas





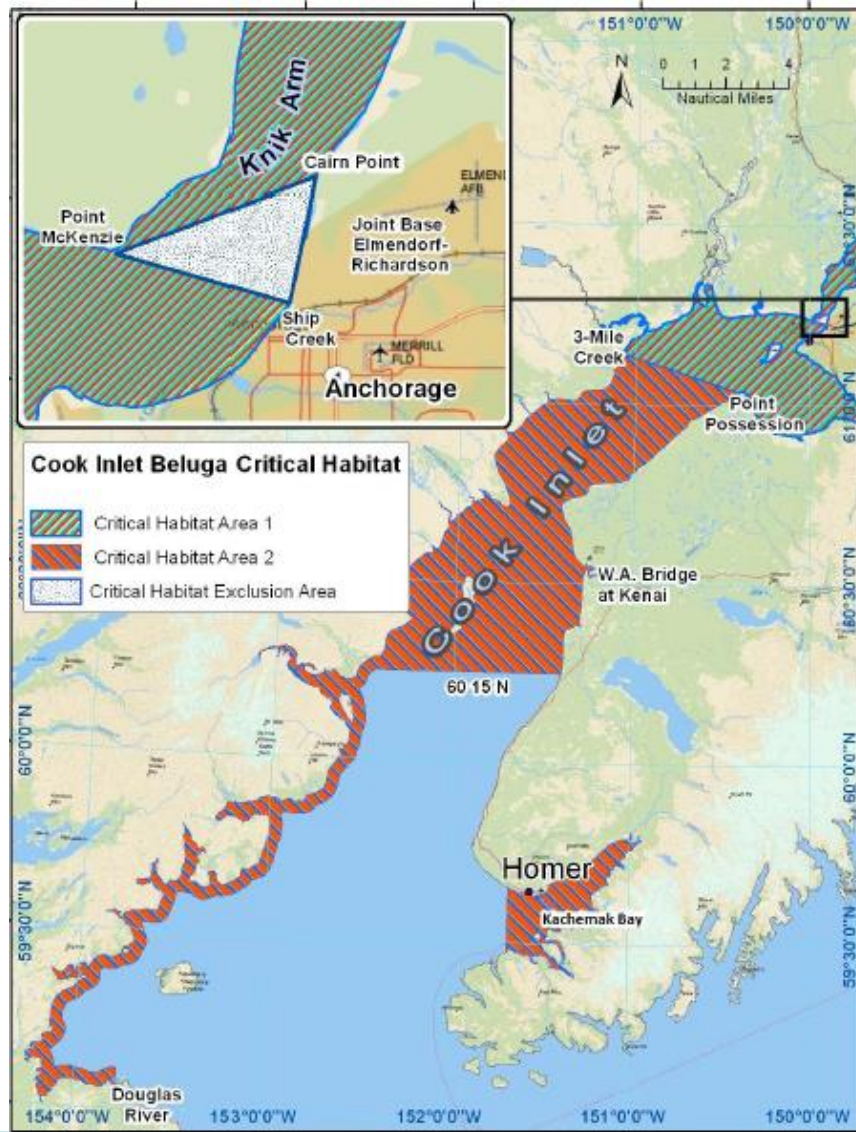
Cook Inlet Belugas

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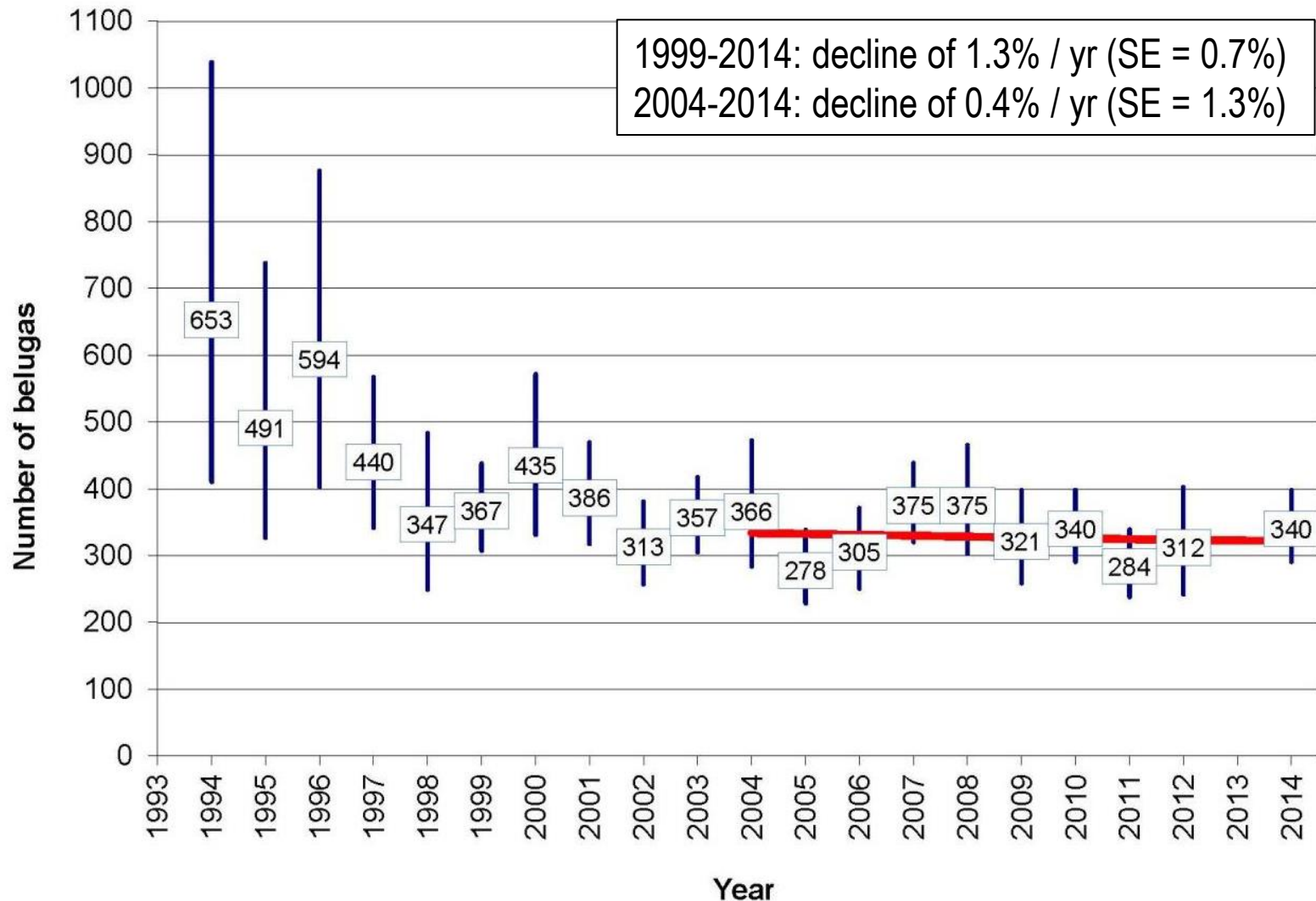


Not
Cook Inlet Belugas

Cook Inlet Beluga Whale Critical Habitat



Status of Cook Inlet Belugas: Endangered





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How Effective is NOAA Fisheries at Recovery Planning?

Recovery Outline

- Published Feb 2010
- Relied heavily on the Oct 2008 MMPA Conservation Plan for Cook Inlet belugas
- During development of draft recovery plan, the Conservation Plan was the guiding document, not the recovery outline

RECOVERY OUTLINE for Cook Inlet Beluga Whales (*Delphinapterus leucas*) February 2010



Cook Inlet beluga whale mother and calf in Eagle Bay
photo credit: Christopher Garner, U.S. Army, Fort Richardson, Alaska, 2007

DISCLAIMER: This outline, in concert with the Conservation Plan for Cook Inlet Beluga Whales (*Delphinapterus leucas*), is meant to serve as an interim guidance document to direct recovery efforts, including recovery planning, for the recently listed Cook Inlet beluga whale until a full recovery plan is developed and approved. A preliminary strategy for recovery of the species is presented here, as are recommended high priority actions to stabilize and recover the species. The recovery outline is intended primarily for internal use by the National Marine Fisheries Service as a pre-planning document. Formal public participation will be invited upon the release of the draft recovery plan for this species. However, any new information or comments that members of the public may wish to offer as a result of this recovery outline will be taken into consideration during the recovery planning process. Recovery planning is scheduled to begin in February 2010, and the recovery plan is targeted for completion in March 2013. NMFS invites public participation in the planning process. Interested parties may contact Mandy Migura at mandy.migura@noaa.gov or 907-271-1332.

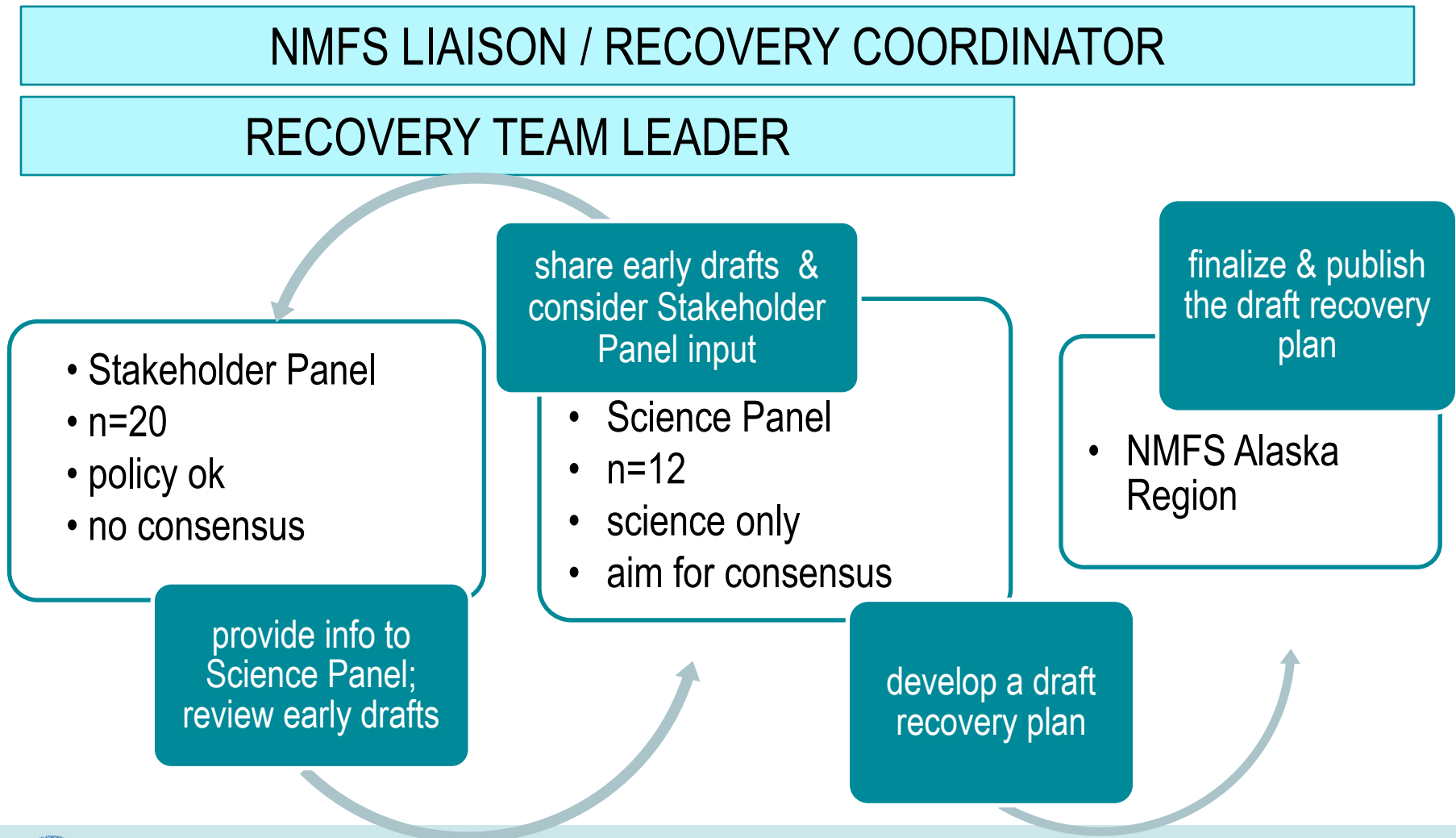
Recovery Planning Approach

- Single-species plan...however
 - effective recovery of a single species cannot be done absent consideration of the health of its ecosystem
 - Plan does discuss habitat, predator, and prey interactions; threats those may present to beluga recovery; and if necessary, actions targeted at those issues and not directly at belugas

Recovery Team Process – The Vision

- Pre-scheduled meetings - once every 4 months
 - ok if not all participants attend
- Defined topics and goals for each meeting
 - building off the existing Conservation Plan
 - utilizing the TNC's Conservation Action Planning tool
- 5, 3-day meetings
 - 1 day Stakeholder Panel; 2 days Science Panel
- 18 months duration

The Recovery Team Structure & Roles



Recovery Team Challenges

- Team chose to start from scratch rather than update/modify the Conservation Plan, and to not utilize the TNC's CAP tool
- Science Panel requested closed door meetings ... Stakeholder Panel requested open Science Panel meetings
- Science Panel requested removal of two Science Panel members because they were directed by their agency to represent policy

Recovery Team Challenges cont.

- A subset of the Stakeholder Panel requested their own team leader and to develop their own recovery plan
- Unpaid volunteers; NMFS had no “stick or carrot” to encourage hard work or timeliness
- Timeline kept growing... 18 estimated months turned into 36 months, at which point the Science Panel determined “it has now fulfilled the mission it was asked to undertake by NMFS”

Recovery Team Challenges cont.

- Final team product delivered to NMFS required significant additional work before the draft could be published
- NMFS actions were inconsistent
 - delayed or cancelled planned meetings
 - did not consistently enforce the TOR
 - provided Team Leader with conflicting guidance

Recovery Team Challenges cont.

Cook Inlet Beluga Whale Recovery Team Leader's letter to NMFS March 14, 2013:

“The biggest challenges to creating this recovery plan in a timely manner were: (1) a lack of information; (2) identifying and accessing information that already existed; (3) political issues between NMFS and ADF&G resulting in replacement of two Science Panel members; (4) participation of fewer than half of the Science Panel members in the actual work of writing the draft plan; (5) inconsistent guidance from various NMFS staff; and (6) NMFS-mandated changes to the process, including the Terms of Reference and the meeting schedules.”

Recovery Team Success

- Comprehensive document with a diversity of experiences and opinions incorporated
- More technical/detailed information because written by various experts (e.g., noise and fisheries management sections)
- Greater diversity of stakeholder concerns considered during development of the plan

Recovery Planning Engagement

- Large recovery team with variety of participants including representatives from tribal co-management partner for Cook Inlet belugas, Alaska Natives, tribal organizations, State of Alaska, local governments, DOD, NGOs, industry, fishing, etc.
- Individuals' level of involvement on the recovery team was quite variable, from little to no participation or contribution during meetings, to extensive participation and attendance at every meeting

Recovery Science

- Multiple internal recovery team peer reviews (prior to submitting a draft to NMFS)
- When draft published, NMFS solicited and received peer reviews from 5 experts not affiliated with recovery team
- Peer reviewer comments will be incorporated into final recovery plan as appropriate
- Given length of process, some documents referenced in final plan may not be the most recent or best available

Recovery Planning Priority

- For the first 3 years, Recovery Team had the lead
- Recovery Team was composed of volunteers, most with full time employment
- Individuals' priorities and available time for this process varied – ranging from some extremely prepared members to others not being prepared at all during meetings
- This was part of the reason for the extended timeline

Recovery Planning Priority cont.

- Upon receipt of initial draft from team, NMFS took the lead
- Limited number of NMFS AKR staff available to work on this plan
- Staff time was substantially redirected to projects with defined deadlines (e.g., ESA s4 decisions; s7 consultations; s7-related lawsuit)
- This was part of the reason for the extended timeline

Post-Recovery Team, NMFS Efforts

- March 2013 - Present
- NMFS hired a contractor to modify team's document to:
 - Provide an executive summary
 - Develop and proof the literature cited section
 - Provide consistent formatting (e.g., section numbering; repeated phrasings in different sections)

Post-Recovery Team, NMFS Efforts cont.

- NMFS Revisions & Modifications:
 - Standardized the voice of multiple authors
 - Revised recovery criteria and actions for reasonableness and to meet legal requirements
 - Updated the document (e.g., abundance estimate; number of strandings; fixed known data errors)
- Published Draft Recovery Plan May 15, 2015
- Now reviewing public and peer-review comments

Recovery Planning Time

- October 2008 – Listed as an Endangered Species
 - January 2010 – Notice of Intent to Prepare a Recovery Plan published
 - February 2010 – Recovery Outline published
 - March 2010 – First Recovery Team Meeting
 - March 2013 – Final Recovery Team Meeting
 - May 2015 – Draft Recovery Plan Published
 - Summer/Fall 2016 – Final Recovery Plan Published
- {Time from Listing to Today = 7 years, 6 months}
- {Time from NOI to Today = 6 years, 4 months}



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Cook Inlet Beluga Whale Recovery Planning Summary and Conclusions

Process Review

- Utilized a large recovery team (30+ members) to develop a draft plan, perhaps causing more conflict than support
- Many factors resulted in delays
- Team's version required substantial edits NMFS staff and time were limited, and recovery planning was not always the priority
- This recovery planning process has already taken more than 6 years...and counting
- BUT – lack of a final recovery plan has not stopped us from implementing recovery!

Lessons from the Beluga Recovery Team

- Recognize limitations of using volunteers
- Keep the team small (more \neq better)
- Identify writers & sequester them
- Avoid distractions (i.e., internet access)
- Pre-schedule the meetings and stick to the schedule
- Have a clearly defined role and expectations for stakeholder involvement
- Provide consistent, predictable guidance
- Enforce terms of reference

Conclusion

- The Cook Inlet Beluga Whale Recovery Team structure and process had good intent, targeting inclusivity in a contentious political environment. This exact model is not recommended for future recovery planning efforts.
- Fortunately, we had a Conservation Plan that provided a framework towards “recovery” during recovery plan development.
- Upon publication of the draft recovery plan, that has become our guiding document, replacing the Conservation Plan.
- Recovery efforts were implemented throughout the “recovery planning” process.



Questions?



**Photo credit: LGL Alaska Research Associates,
MMPA/ESA Research Permit #14210**



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